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## AN INTERVIEW WITH H. M. J. HERATH ON ASPECTS OF CULTURE IN SRI LANKA

Le Roy Robinson

Herath Mudiyansele Jayasinghe Herath is a Chief Project Officer in the Higher Institute for English Education, Colombo, Sri Lanka. He is also the academic coordinator of the Bandarawele Centre for Professional English Teacher Training and a visiting lecturer in education at the University of Peradeniya.

He was born on November 27, 1940, in Deliwala, a village in the Kegalle District.

Herath had his general education at Dharmaraja College, a well-known Buddhist high school in Kandy. From 1961 through 1963 he attended the University of Ceylon at Peradeniya.

In 1963 Herath joined the Sri Lanka Education Department as a teacher. After that he worked as a Section Head, a Deputy Principal and a Principal in various schools.

In 1971 he received his Diploma in Education from the University of Sri Lanka at Peradeniya, where he majored in English Methodology.

In 1973 Herath was the lecturer in charge of the Ampara Centre for the training of Master Teachers.

In 1982 he returned to the University of Peradeniya (formerly the University of Ceylon at Peradeniya and the University of Sri Lanka at Peradeniya) and received an M. A. in Education.

In 1983 Herath joined the English Teachers' College, Mirigama, as a lecturer in English Methodology, Phonetics, and the Structure of English. He also lectured at the University of Peradeniya in Comparative Education and Sinhala Methodology. He was also a visiting lecturer in Professional English at the Open University.

In 1984 Herath received a scholarship to study at Reading University, the U. K., and acquired a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics.

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ROBINSON: To begin with, would you mind explaining your name?

HERATH: Well, as you know, in Sri Lanka we use our surnames first. The first part of my name, Herath Mudiyansele, is the family name. It literally means "in the house of Herath Mudiyanse" and it's an ancient title meaning "Commanding Officer of the Army".

ROBINSON: Was your family in the military?

HERATH: Etymologically the term Herath suggests a military origin. But I don't know whether my family was military. Like most Kandyan families we had served the King and had been given land in return for the services rendered. The title deeds, I'm told, were lost in the confusion that followed one of the Portuguese invasions of Kandy in the 16th century.

ROBINSON: Is there anything special about Deliwala, the village you were born in?

HERATH: Well, there's a Buddhist Stupa built in the 3rd century B. C. And close to that there's a dolmen belonging to the Paleolithic age.

ROBINSON: Did living in Deliwala influence your life?

HERATH: I'm not sure whether my native village, Deliwala, had much influence on me because I was there for only a short time. But memories of the days I spent there still linger in my mind. The whole village then consisted of about twenty families. All related to one another. There were no fences round houses or gardens. It was more like common property. I remember how we kids flocked under fruit trees — mango, kadju, jambu — to collect fruit. Nobody chased us away. We could have our meals at any house. That is, wherever we happened to be playing. There was no scarcity of food. The village was self-sufficient. Children weren't a burden. They were a source of joy and pleasure. Villagers were simple, kind and helpful. The novelist Martin Wickramasinghe would have said it was pristine Sinhala-Buddhist culture!

ROBINSON: Were there nursery schools for children in the village?

HERATH: No, there were no nursery schools then. At least not in the dry zone where my father was working then. And there wasn't that competition for tuition that we see around us today. So my parents were careful to let the teachers do the teaching. This is what I do with my two kids. My wife is a maths specialist teacher. But we never goad our two boys to study, nor do we send them for outside tuition. Yet I see they do very well compared to their friends who attend private tuition classes for the rest of the day after school. Unlike most children today I had the good fortune to be with my parents most of the time. At least my mother was there with me. And very often my grandmother was there. She was a treasure house of stories, riddles, poems, and almost everything that children like to hear. She taught me how to make baskets with coconut leaves and how to make sweets like rice cake and aluwa.

ROBINSON: What was your mother's background?

HERATH: My mother had studied up to the secondary level in a Sinhala school. She looked after the family. In those days women were not expected to work. I mean to

be employed outside the home. She had two brothers, both in the Education Department. One was a headmaster. He died a few years ago. The other was an education officer. Now retired.

ROBINSON: What was your father's background?

HERATH: He was a public servant. A railway supervisor in the Way and Works Department. He died several years ago. He had a very good education in Sinhala. I don't think he was taught English or Tamil in school, but he was fluent in both. He did his office work in English. He worked for some time in Jaffna. In the early 1940s. Perhaps that's where he caught his Tamil. Those days the public servants communicated with the government in English, the official language then, and communicated with the public in their languages, Sinhala and Tamil.

ROBINSON: Did your father encourage you to be a teacher?

HERATH: My father gave me everything, but when it came to decisions about studies, and jobs, he always said: "You know what is best for you." Frankly, I didn't!

ROBINSON: What kind of education did your father give you at home?

HERATH: When I was very small he used to play with me in the evenings. And when it was time for me to sleep he'd lie down on the bed and put me on his chest and would go on relating stories till I was half asleep. The stories were about ancient heroes. Most of them, I learned later, were from the Jataka tales or Sanskrit classics like Ramayana. Sometimes he related witty and humorous tales, mostly folk stories. But they were never the fairy tale type which took you to a fantasy land out of touch with reality. My father never forced me to learn. But those stories gave me the taste of learning. Perhaps they are the driving force behind me which makes me go on learning when most of my contemporaries at the 'varsity, the university, have given up learning for "better" things in life. I think most folk stories are in touch with reality. The one I especially like is the one Dr. Ediriweera Sarachchandra used for his play *Elowa Gihin Melowa Awa*.

ROBINSON: What are most of your contemporaries doing?

HERATH: Some are in the administrative service. Quite a few are in business, in private firms. Only a handful are in teaching. Mostly women. Many have left the country for greener pastures.

ROBINSON: Your father seems to have been a man who liked learning too.

HERATH: Yes, during his free time and in retirement, my father read palm-leaf manuscripts on various aspects of medicine. These *ola* were a family treasure. Most of the Kandyan families those days, and sometimes even now, specialized in different

branches of medicine. Towards the end of his life my father got almost obsessed with meditation. Sometimes he used to tell me of his experiences in meditation. Once he confided that it was the most pleasant experience in life.

ROBINSON: Was anybody in your family in medicine?

HERATH: My father's brother is an Ayurvedic physician. In my generation no one seems to be interested in that life. In the previous generation — my father's and grandfather's — many people connected to our family were engaged in medicine. One or two made it their profession. Others did it as a kind of social service. "Out of compassion for human life", they used to say. They thought it bad to use their learning as a means of earning money. Even now you get a few physicians like that in villages who not only prescribe medicine but very often provide the medicine, which is mostly herbal, and provide it free of charge. Incidentally, my mother's father was an Ayurvedic physician too. But the children of both her brothers became engineers. Not a single one took to medicine. The old *ola* books on medicine are decaying in ancient wooden boxes. Remnants of a dying culture!

ROBINSON: Was Dharmaraja College influential for you?

HERATH: Of course, Dharmaraja did influence me a lot. It helped to mold my character and enlarge my vision of the world. We had an excellent principal. S. A. Wijetillake. He was well versed in English and Western classical languages like Latin. But he was an ardent admirer of Eastern culture as well. He taught us how to appreciate the Sinhalese culture. He was certainly a patriot even though he did not proclaim he was. Dharmaraja itself came out of the Buddhist revival in the 19th century and it has continued to be in the forefront of Sinhala – Buddhist nationalism. It just celebrated its centenary.

ROBINSON: What did the patriotic Sinhala Buddhist curriculum consist of at the time, in the 1950s?

HERATH: Well, there was no "patriotic Sinhala Buddhist curriculum" as such at Dharmaraja. Or at any other school then. If Dharmaraja inculcated a sense of patriotic idealism, it was not through instruction or through a special curriculum. The curriculum was more or less the same in both government and private schools except that the private schools had financial strength to employ teachers for special subjects like Latin, Sanskrit and accountancy. It was really the example set by the teachers that made the difference. The teachers were then very much involved in national movements. The movement that led to the take over of private schools was supported by the teachers at Dharmaraja. Of course, there were a few who opposed it, too.

When there was some objection to making Sinhala and Tamil the media of instruction in higher education on the grounds that science subjects cannot be taught in the native languages, it was teachers like Harischandra Wijetunge of Dharmaraja who wrote science books in Sinhala and proved how futile the argument was. He's now a well-known lawyer in Colombo. He appears to take an interest in the so-called ethnic struggle.

ROBINSON: What were some of the arguments in favor of the government's taking over of the private schools?

HERATH: There were many allegations, especially against managers. Mismanagement. Misappropriation. Various malpractices. Harassment of teachers. On the other hand, certain schools found it difficult to continue due to lack of funds. Hence there was public agitation for the takeover of these schools. There were vested interests who wanted to have the private schools, for example, Catholic schools, and they were allowed to continue without government support. Recently, the government decided to pay the salaries of teachers in private schools. So we have almost reverted to the pre-1961 era.

ROBINSON: Was the patriotism that was informally taught at Dharmaraja chauvinistic?

HERATH: Dharmaraja stood for a kind of positive nationalism. Not a parochial or racist ideology. Dharmaraja had teachers belonging to different ethnic groups and religions then. My English teacher was a Tamil. The class teacher, the homeroom teacher, was a Burgher. It was P. de S. Kularatne, an earlier principal of Dharmaraja, and an eminent educationist, who advocated that Tamil should be taught to Sinhala children. Had such a suggestion been put into practice, things would have been quite different today.

ROBINSON: You have two M. A. degrees. What were your theses about?

HERATH: My M. A. Ed. thesis was an investigation into a belief I had about how the mother tongue of Sinhalese pupils interferes with their learning of a second language. In my research, which was based on Error Analysis, I found my hypothesis to be correct — that the MT did interfere with the pupils' learning of English. The second M. A. in Applied Linguistics, which I did in the U. K., was a comparative study of the pronunciation of English diphthongs by Sinhala-speaking Sri Lankans and native speakers of English.

ROBINSON: Do you think "interference" is important to communication?

HERATH: Nowadays its importance is de-emphasized. Present day applied linguists look at the phenomenon more as a learning strategy adopted by the pupils

than as interference.

ROBINSON: Anyway, would you give a couple of examples of native language interference found among Sinhala-speaking students of English?

HERATH: Spectrographs show clear differences in the articulation of certain diphthongs between the native and Sinhala speakers of English. In Sinhala speakers' speech they appeared more or less as monophthongs. Also the average frequency range for all diphthongs was lower for the Sinhala speakers. Also Sinhalese pupils find English noun modification difficult because in Sinhala nouns can only be premodified but in English they can be pre-modified and post-modified. Similar examples can be cited in relative clause construction, the concept of definiteness, and word order. Many pupils write sentences like: "My mother (is) my teacher" — the copulative verb is absent. Or "(There are) thirty students in my class" — the dummy subject is omitted.

ROBINSON: I understand you have written several reports on teaching that haven't been published yet.

HERATH: Yes. I presented my first report to the University of Peradeniya in 1971. It was an evaluation of a new technique of teaching English called the Reconstruction Method. It was put forward by Dr. Douglas Walatara. The method attempts to teach English by getting the pupils to reconstruct in English the language units presented in the mother tongue, Sinhala or Tamil. This comes close to the translation method. My report hasn't been published yet, but it has been quoted in a number of articles. Dr. Walatara himself quoted it in an article in the R. E. L. C. Journal in Singapore. I've written short reports recently on the PRINSETT program, but I hope to do a much more thorough examination of the same sometime later. PRINSETT is an acronym standing for Professional In Service English Teacher Training. Dr. Walatara used to be a lecturer in English Methodology at the English Teachers College at Maharagama. Then he joined the Education Department of the University of Peradeniya. Later he was in charge of the Worker Education Unit at the University of Colombo. Now he's retired. He's written a couple of books and several articles on the Reconstruction Method. I learned under him when I did my post-graduate diploma and for a short time had the opportunity of working with him on his method.

ROBINSON: Now we'll come up to date. What is the Higher Institute for English Education?

HERATH: The H. I. E. E. is an institution attached to the National Institute of Education. The N. I. E. came into existence a few years ago by an Act of Parliament. It's a semi-independent corporate body under the Ministry of Educa-

tion. Its Director—General is Mr. D. A. Perera. Its main purpose is to help in the planning of educational policy. There are a number of institutes — the Staff College, the Institute of Aesthetic Studies, and the Higher Institute for English Education.

As for the H. I. E. E., it was proposed some time ago when the Minister of Education Mr. Ranil Wickramasinghe met the then British High Commissioner Mr. Stuart to discuss British aid to English language teaching in Sri Lanka. (The present High Commissioner is Mr. Gladstone. He's related to that well-known prime minister.) The Sri Lanka Ministry of Education had come to recognize that successful foreign language teaching requires a cadre of teacher—educators of the highest quality — and with the most up-to-date training. So it's the role of the Higher Institute for English Education to provide this cadre — and to raise the standard of E. L. T. in Sri Lankan schools and colleges of education.

ROBINSON: How is the Higher Institute for English Education staffed?

HERATH: We commenced work with a Director and two Sri Lankan teachers. We have a British Council advisor. The present staff consists of the Director, two Chief Project Officers, two lecturers — on attachment basis — and three British Council consultants.

ROBINSON: How are you funded?

HERATH: We're funded by the government of Sri Lanka. As I suggested, we also get aid from the British Overseas Development Administration through the British Council. To be a little more specific, the Sri Lanka government provides our premises, our local staff members, basic equipment, furniture, and stationery. The B. O. D. A. provides the three consultant staff members and some equipment and books. If you're interested in further details about all this, you should read our H. I. E. E. Report. And, by the way, we're going to start publishing the H. I. E. E. Bulletin soon.

ROBINSON: Do you get aid from other English-speaking countries?

HERATH: Yes. Sri Lanka gets English Education aid from Australia, New Zealand, and the U. S. A. — personnel (for example, Peace Corps volunteers) and books.

ROBINSON: What kind of projects has the Higher Institute for English Education already done?

HERATH: We've conducted a number of short courses. At the request of the English Division of the Curriculum Development Centre. For example, the diploma course in the Teaching of English as a Second Language. There are twenty students in this course. In addition, there are around twenty five students attending a three-month



course on English Language Teaching Techniques and Media. These students are teachers or teacher educators. They're either English – trained teachers or university graduates with over five years of English teaching experience. Each is selected by a test and a personal interview. They get study leave from their schools for the duration of the course.

ROBINSON: Socially speaking, who are these students?

HERATH: H. I. E. E. students include both men and women, married and unmarried, between the ages of 20 and 50. There are Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Burghers. There is no racial or religious or language discrimination anywhere in the educational system in Sri Lanka. At the H. I. E. E. we always try to have a reasonable geographical and social distribution, but a lot depends on the marks applicants obtain on the selection test.

ROBINSON: As part of their school work, what else do these students do besides attending lectures?

HERATH: In addition to lectures, they're taken on visits to various educational institutions in Sri Lanka. Teachers training colleges, colleges of education, PRINSETT centers and DELIC centers. District English Language Improvement Centers. They do micro – teaching and practice teaching at schools in and around Colombo.

ROBINSON: What kind of schools do you take them to?

HERATH: Both government and private schools. They can be primary, junior secondary, senior secondary, or a combination of these three. We also take students to senior secondary colleges. Most of these were prestigious private schools before they were taken over by the government in 1961.

ROBINSON: Incidentally, would you clarify these terms very briefly?

HERATH: Primary or elementary education is from 1 st year to 4 th year. Junior secondary is from years 5 through 7. Senior secondary, years 8, 9, 10, and 11. Collegiate, 12 and 13. Children are admitted to primary school when they are about six years old.

To enter the university one has to be over 18 — that has been the rule right from the beginning. The average student enters the university at around 20. Those over 23 are considered adult candidates. They can register as external candidates if they satisfy the minimum requirements.

ROBINSON: Also briefly, explain how the word *college* is used in Sri Lanka.

HERATH: The term *college* is traditionally used to refer to certain secondary schools, most of which were private institutions before 1961, They're now government schools. Ananda College, say, or Zahira College. It's used also to refer to

prestigious private schools. For example, Trinity College or St. Thomas' College. It also refers to different types of tertiary institutions — polytechnical colleges, teacher training colleges, law college, medical college. The term does not usually have the connotation of a college as an affiliated institute of a university.

ROBINSON: What is micro-teaching?

HERATH: Micro-teaching is a teacher training technique used in Teachers Colleges and Colleges of Education in Sri Lanka. Trainees practice different teaching skills like asking questions, giving instructions, and using gestures, with small groups of students or peers, for short periods of time, say five to ten minutes. Then they discuss this short lesson and sometimes re-teach it.

ROBINSON: How do you evaluate these students?

HERATH: There's continuous internal assessment of student performance. The core components of the course are tested by written examinations. Each student also has to do a research project.

ROBINSON: What kind of research projects do they do?

HERATH: They engage in small scale research. They have the freedom to select any area related to the course. For example, Error Analysis, Contrastive Analysis, Conversational analysis, learning strategies, teaching materials, and so on.

ROBINSON: How are the relations between the faculty and the students?

HERATH: The relations between the staff and the students are very cordial. Very close. Staff members — both local and foreign — are always available for advice and consultation.

ROBINSON: And as a Chief Project Officer what do you yourself do?

HERATH: I'm in charge of the Educational Technology. Library. Other resources. (Of course I do lectures in the courses as well.) Our library is a very modest one. But it contains the most recent publications on E. L. T. Perhaps the best such collection in Sri Lanka. We subscribe to important journals on language and language teaching. We're planning to have a separate resource room, very soon, to house the equipment we have — a video camera, a TV, three computers, a number of overhead projectors, tape recorders, and so on. As a matter of fact, we're expecting a language laboratory from Japan. Let me say that even though we have this modern equipment and make the maximum use of it, we emphasize the importance of using low cost materials available locally. Also, research is an important part of a C. P. O.'s work. We're expected to conduct research in education, especially in the field of teacher training.

ROBINSON: Would you briefly describe the system of languages of instruction in Sri Lankan universities.

HERATH: In all education institutions, instruction is given either in Sinhala or Tamil. Certain institutions use both. For certain subjects, English is used as the medium of instruction. The University of Colombo uses Sinhala, as Dr. B. E. S. J. Bastiampillai told you. The University of Jaffna and the University of Batticaloa use Tamil. Peradeniya uses both Sinhala and Tamil. At one time there was a Sinhala section in Jaffna University. Recently Muslim students who sat the university entrance exam in Tamil — most Muslims here speak Tamil as their mother tongue — refused to go to Jaffna. Consequently they were admitted to the University of Peradeniya.

ROBINSON: You say there's no racial or religious or language discrimination in the educational system, but other people say there is.

HERATH: I still maintain my position: there's no discrimination in the educational system on the grounds of race, religion or language. Some time ago it was alleged that the university selection system discriminated by allocating a quota of its admissions to students from educationally less developed areas. For example, a student from Jaffna or Colombo or Kandy who gets 210 marks — the aggregate — may not be selected, whereas a student from Kalmunai or Ampara with only 170 marks, say, will get selected. If this system was discriminatory against the Tamil student in Jaffna, it was equally discriminatory against the Sinhalese student in Colombo. The objective of the selection system was not racial or linguistic discrimination, but positive discrimination towards educationally less privileged areas. In short, what you Americans call affirmative action.

ROBINSON: Earlier you referred to the Curriculum Development Centre. Would you say something more about that?

HERATH: The C. D. C. was started in the late 1960s to initiate curriculum development in Sri Lanka schools. It introduced many innovations in both primary and secondary curricula here. It has produced internationally recognized curriculum planners like Mrs. Kamala Peiris. In 1972 the English unit of the C. D. C. introduced the first set of English texts produced locally. More recently a new set of English textbooks based on the Communicative Approach was introduced on the advice of the then Director of English Mr. M. A. De Silva, who's presently the Assistant Director General of the National Institute of Education, and Mr. Nihal Cooray. Mrs. L. K. Cumararatunga, the present Director of the Higher Institute for English Education, was very much involved in that effort. She started her career as a teacher and was a lecturer at

Maharagama Teachers College before she became the director of the H. I. E. E. Incidentally, her husband is Secretary of the Treasury and is related to the famous Sinhala critic Munidasa Cumaranatunga about whom P. N. Cumaranatunga has spoken with you.

ROBINSON: Can you tell us a little more about Kamala Peiris, M. A. de Silva and Nihal Cooray?

HERATH: Dr. Peiris was formerly the Director of Education in charge of Primary Education. She conducted a number of researches in that area. She was responsible for the Integrated Primary Curriculum adopted several years ago. Dr. de Silva had served in different parts of the country as an education officer before he became the Director of Education for English. He's not only a very capable administrator but a very keen scholar as well. His main area of interest is language learning. When the National Institute of Education was constituted, he was appointed Assistant Director General in charge of Curriculum Planning. Mr. Nihal Cooray is the present Director of Education in charge of Languages, Social Studies and Religion. Before that he was the Chief Education Officer for English. He's also been the Chief Controlling Examiner for English Language for the G. C. E. (O. L.).

ROBINSON: What is the Ampara Centre you used to be in charge of?

HERATH: This was an in-service teacher training center. We trained Master teachers there. After the course they had to sit a test — at the end of one year. Later a training college was opened at Ampara, but after a few years it was closed down.

ROBINSON: And the English Teachers' College at Minigama where you used to lecture?

HERATH: Minigama English Teachers' College was one of four E. T. colleges at the time. This was closed down, too. Now there are only two E. T. Colleges — at Bolawalana and at Peradeniya. However, there is a new College of Education for English at Kalutara, which admits young students between 18 and 24 who have got four A Level passes. The school trains them for teaching careers.

ROBINSON: What do you mean by G. C. E. O. L. and A. L.?

HERATH: I'm referring to the General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level or Advanced Level. "A Level" is more or less equivalent to the London A Level. It is also taken as the University Entrance Examination. A candidate who passes in three subjects and obtains at least 25% in the other one fulfills the minimum requirement for university entrance. But there are special provisions for certain classes of government employees to enter and study as internal candidates irrespective of A. L. qualifications. For example, teachers with a certificate and certain officers in the

Department of Agriculture. But then they have other, equivalent, qualifications. With proposed changes in the education system there will be different routes leading to university education, and it will be possible to enter university without an A. L. qualification. However, at the moment, these suggestions are not clearly worked out.

ROBINSON: Why were these training colleges you referred to before closed?

HERATH: It was due to a policy decision by the government. Earlier there were about 26 teachers' colleges. Some were closed down. Some were replaced by new Colleges of Education. Minigama English Teachers' College was replaced by a College of Education for Social Studies, for example. The aim was to complete the training of teachers in service as quickly as possible through distance education courses and to use existing facilities to put up new colleges of education which were to provide pre-service training for young people aspiring to become teachers.

ROBINSON: What is the Open University?

HERATH: Since the 1960s there has been a very rapid increase in the demand for higher education here. Now we have about ten universities and university institutes. Still each year out of about 25,000 applicants who qualify for university entrance only about 5,000 are admitted. To help these students who fail to get admission and more importantly to help others who have no preliminary qualification to enter a university, the Open University was established. By incorporating its forerunner, the Sri Lanka Institute for Distance Education. SLIDE. The Open University now runs courses in Law, Education and Science. Its campus is located at Nawala in Nugegoda, a few miles from Colombo. It has a few regional centers, too, in major towns.

ROBINSON: Please explain the idea of preliminary qualification.

HERATH: To enter a government university in Sri Lanka the minimum qualification is what I've already referred to. An adult candidate over 23 years of age can register for a degree if he or she has at least 3 Advanced Level passes. So, those who have educational qualification lower than this, those who are already employed and have no way of doing G.C.E. A Level exams — due to family problems, economic reasons, lack of facilities, lack of time, and so forth — and those who are literate but have no valid educational qualification like G. C. E. O. L. or A. L. can register with the Open University for further or higher education.

ROBINSON: And what is the Bandarawele Center where you're an academic coordinator?

HERATH: Bandarawele Prinsett Center is located in the Bandarawele National College.

The school's classrooms are used during the weekend. The other five centers are also located in schools in Colombo, Galle, Anuradhapura, Ratnapura and Kurunegala. As I said, PRINCETT is an acronym standing for Professional In Service English Teacher Training. This is an innovation in in-service teacher training. At the moment the two existing English Teacher Training Colleges together can train only about 400 teachers a year. And we have a backlog of about 2,000 untrained English teachers, and they keep increasing with new recruitments each year. To cope with this situation, the Prinsett Program was launched. About 800 untrained English teachers — the first batch — attended weekend classes in six centres in different parts of the country for two years. They had residential vacation institute training in Teachers' Colleges during school vacations. Then they sat the Training College Final Exam, along with their colleagues who entered the training colleges. They underwent the same examination, the same training, as was given in the Teachers Colleges. They worked at their schools for four days a week. They got Monday duty leave for attending the weekend classes. The second batch will be sitting the final exam soon, and we're eagerly waiting to see how successful this experiment is.

ROBINSON: To be a little more personal, did you have a hard time breaking into the teaching profession?

HERATH: In the early 1960s it wasn't a problem for a graduate to get a job, if that's what you're referring to. Very often, immediately after the final exam, you could enter the Education Department as a teacher, hoping to proceed to a more lucrative or prestigious position in the administrative system. In those days, unlike today, a graduate teacher got a comparatively high salary, a lot of respect, and a comfortable school. You had sufficient freedom and enough holidays.

ROBINSON: Did you have any particularly interesting experiences as a beginning administrator?

HERATH: It's very difficult to select out of so many different types of experience. However, one incident still remains vivid in my memory. Soon after I received my Diploma in Education in 1971 I was sent as principal to a Maha Vidyalaya, a colony school in Ampara, a difficult area. The transfer letter reached me on the 25th of November asking me to assume duties on the 23rd. I was quite adventurous and made no fuss about it. So I left home on the morning of the 26th and after a tiring twelve hour bus ride I reached the school. I had a terrible headache. It was quite dark. A kind villager escorted me to the school. There, an elderly teacher was preparing his dinner. He had known nothing of my appointment. I informed him that I was the

new principal. His immediate response was: "Why, Sir, you had a quarrel with the M. P.?" Later I came to know that area was called "Siberia", where victims of political transfers were kept. This particular teacher had been there for seven years and still not been given a transfer. To be fair, I must say I was able to leave the school after two months.

ROBINSON: By M. P. do you mean Member of Parliament?

HERATH: Yes. Things are quite different now. Thanks to our young Minister of Education Mr. Wickramasinghe, who is doing his best to keep politics away from education. But there was a time when Members of Parliament could transfer teachers as they wished. One had to get his M. P.'s letter to get a teaching appointment. Now the situation is much better. Teachers are recruited after a competitive examination. Political interference in transfers is almost *nil*.

ROBINSON: What is a colony school?

HERATH: Soon after independence in 1948 various colonization schemes were started to develop agriculture and make the country self-sufficient in food. These were located mostly in the sparsely populated dry zone. The Gal Oya scheme in Ampara was one of them. It was started in about 1952. The scheme consisted of over twenty settlements or colonies, as they were called. And the school that catered to the needs of each of these colonies was called a colony school. To begin with most were primary schools. Later they developed into secondary schools. These schools — the buildings — were very well-planned. They had most of the facilities a school needed. Including teachers' quarters.

ROBINSON: Why did you call Ampara a difficult area?

HERATH: There are difficulties, problems, in certain areas of the island. Transport. Housing. Health. Facilities are minimal. During the monsoons from September to January certain areas are entirely cut off from the rest of the island by floods. Sometimes for weeks. And you don't know what's happening in the outside world. To reach certain schools you have to travel several miles on foot. Over the years the conditions have improved. Many villages have electricity now, for example. New roads are being built. So the situation now is not as bad as it was a decade ago. But still there are difficult schools.

ROBINSON: You must have been happy to leave that school.

HERATH: In fact, I loved that school. To be frank, I didn't want to leave that school. It was comfortable. I had my own quarters. The location was beautiful. People were very helpful. Children were eager to learn. The staff was good. No, I shouldn't have

said "I was able to leave", but I had to because the Education Department gave me another school some 40 miles away.

ROBINSON: After only two months?

HERATH: This is how it happened. Ampara district was divided into circuits, Ampara and Maha Oya, under two Circuit Inspectors. Ampara circuit being close to the big town was the more privileged. So, when the three of us — the post-graduate diploma holders — were sent there, we were all appointed to schools in Ampara. The Circuit Inspector of Maha Oya protested. He wanted me for the biggest school in *his* circuit. So I had to say goodbye, reluctantly, to the school.

ROBINSON: I hope the Higher Institute for English Education is not like "Siberia" for you.

HERATH: In fact, I feel the work is more meaningful, interesting, inspiring even, and also useful. The salaries are attractive. On the negative side, you can no more enjoy the rights and privileges of a public servant. For example, pension rights. And concessionary season tickets for traveling by train.

ROBINSON: Is the lack of political interference one of the results of an educational reform law?

HERATH: Soon after the present government came into power, a White Paper on Educational Reform was presented. But since there was a lot of public opposition it was never presented as an Education Reform Bill in Parliament. But within the last decade most of its proposals have been implemented. There've been changes in teacher training, the school system, the examination system, the administrative system, the curriculum and a number of other areas.

ROBINSON: Important changes?

HERATH: All these changes will definitely have a tremendous impact on the country's future. The attempt to train young people as teachers before they are given appointments is certainly an important one. The organization of school-clusters for sharing resources is another innovation. Its merits are still to be seen. Revision of teacher's salary scales was another important one which gained the approval of many teachers. The creation of an independent body — the National Institute of Education I spoke about before — for curriculum development and educational planning is another important move.

ROBINSON: Now a small bundle of questions. How do you feel about the situation of education as a whole in Sri Lanka? For example, don't you have a high drop out rate? Are there discipline problems like vandalism? Enough teachers? Enough classrooms?



Maintenance problems?

HERATH: On the whole, I feel the Sri Lankan situation is getting better. Yes, we do have a 50% drop out rate before G. C. E. O. L. There's some vandalism, but not so much. There is some disrepair. Many schools do not use janitors. Teacher—shortage is a problem in difficult areas. In town the problem is the excess of teachers. At present teacher—shortage is not a very acute problem. The problem of pupils from poverty areas is there to some extent, in rural areas. Over—crowding doesn't appear to be a drastic problem either, even though there is pressure on certain popular schools. The problem of minority groups is not a very important one. The education of children of Tamil estate laborers has been stepped up by the government's new schemes. Bureaucracy has certainly been an annoying element. But even there changes are taking place. On the whole, education in Sri Lanka is improving.

ROBINSON: Do you have any comments on the controversy about English in Sri Lanka?

HERATH: I'm not quite sure what you mean by the controversy regarding English Language in Sri Lanka. Till 1956 English was the official language. Then it was replaced by Sinhala. But the president reported last year that English will be made an official language again in the immediate future. This has not happened so far, and it's doubtful whether it will ever happen. But the de facto position of English remains as solid as before. Most people agree there's a need to keep English as a second language in Sri Lanka. Schools have started teaching certain subjects in English, as a matter of fact. Universities are teaching science and engineering in English. There may be hushed opposition to this, and changes in the political arena might bring about reversals. But the status of English will remain more or less stable. I'm not thinking of English as a link language, as some people suggest it should be, to bring Sinhalese and Tamils together, but I'm thinking of it as the most conveniently accessible world language. English is more suitable as a means of international as against intra—national communication.

ROBINSON: You seem to be in disagreement with Sri Lankans who advocate English as a link language to bring Sinhalese and Tamils together.

HERATH: To someone who doesn't know very much about language learning, English as a link language would sound fantastic. But I feel it's unrealistic and impracticable. First, the "upper class" people don't need it for ethnic unity. They already know English anyway. And they're already linked by matrimonial, business and other ties. Second, those at the other end of society, if they happen to be neighbors, have learnt each other's language. For example, most estate Tamils, those who work on tea plan-

tations in the hill country, know Sinhala, and most Sinhalese in the estate areas know Tamil. The same with the Sinhalese who lived in Jaffna and Trincomalee before all the violence started; they knew Tamil. Third, those in the middle, who constitute the largest section, who are educated, “unfortunately”, through their mother tongues, are the ones that face the problem. It’s not the medium that matters but the setting for communication that is necessary. If the Sinhalese and the Tamils have no opportunity to meet and talk, will a link language be of any use?

ROBINSON: Do have any positive suggestion about the language problem in Sri Lanka?

HERATH: To me, the best solution is to learn the other’s language. That is how you can reach him best. After all, you don’t need to talk to your neighbor in a foreign tongue. And, as K. S. Sivakumaran has told you, though Sinhala and Tamil belong to two different language families, they have a lot in common. Both linguistically and culturally. You — and some people here — say “language problem”, but I think the problem here is not very much one of language but of providing avenues for communication. Whenever two groups come together, they devise their own means of communication. So have the Tamils and the Sinhalese. It’s when politicians exploit these groups for their own, the politicians’ advantage, that problems arise. You know that the previous government appointed Sinhala teachers to Tamil schools and Tamil teachers to Sinhalese schools, and made Sinhala an optional language in Tamil schools and Tamil optional in Sinhalese schools. This was a very far-sighted and very sensible policy. However, it was not compulsory. It was left to the wishes of the parents and the staff of each school. Many Parent Teacher Associations were happy to accept it. But some politicians saw it in a different light.

ROBINSON: You have referred to social class. Would you go along with the view expressed by some that in Sri Lanka the separation of social classes is closely related to the use of English?

HERATH: It was generally true of pre-1956 Sri Lanka. But soon after Mr. Bandaranaike came into power — remember, he was a man who spoke English fluently; he’d once led the Oxford University debating team — English was swept away almost over night. Social values changed rapidly. Speaking in Sinhala or Tamil became the style of the day. But when the present government came into power, with all the emphasis on the importance of English, social attitudes began changing again. During TV interviews we see Sinhala-educated executives speaking Sinhala as if it is a foreign tongue to them. Housemaids returning from the Middle East are beginning to use English as their “home language”. Yes, English is gradually re-emerging

as a mark of social status. Yes, certain “capitalistic” sections have been trying to use English as a weapon to keep “outsiders” away from their domains. But, if English is capable of destroying democratic principles of inter-cultural communication, as some complain, then who is to be blamed? No one but ourselves.

ROBINSON: Do you agree with those who say Mr. Bandaranaike’s language policy was a mistake?

HERATH: Mr. Bandaranaike won the 1956 election with a landslide majority because he had promised to make Sinhala the official language instead of English. Therefore, he had to do it. Having done that, he went on to pass another bill on the reasonable use of Tamil. But this was not fully implemented as the issue remained controversial. Tamil politicians asked for 50:50 rights. With no Sinhalese politician willing to make Tamil another official language. Perhaps the politicians would’ve liked it. But the majority of the people didn’t. In my opinion, the Sinhala Only Act remained more or less a dead letter. Legally, Sinhala is the official language. In actual fact, it could be any of the three languages used here. The present government, while maintaining Sinhala is the “official” language, has sought a way out of the problem by making both Tamil and English “national” languages. The language question remains without a clear solution. May I add that even if “Eelam” is granted and the North is separated from Sri Lanka, the language problem will still be here for the rest of the country because half the Tamil-speaking population is outside Jaffna.